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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the characteristics of three schools and considers what lessons modern educators might learn from them. The first school described is the Malting House school, where Susan Isaacs taught for several years. The Malting House school, which existed from 1924 to 1929 in Cambridge, England, teaches the lesson of looking, with attention, at everything that children do. The second school discussed is a present-day primary classroom in Hertfordshire, England, taught by Annabelle Dixon. This classroom demonstrates the relationship between an educator's core values and her pedagogical practices. The third school discussed is Louisa May Alcott's fictional school, Plumfield. The lesson learned from this school is the importance of the imagination, which teaches us to aspire to a more just and harmonious society. (Contains 26 references.) (Author/LPP)

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# Comparisons in Early Years Education: History, Fact, and Fiction

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## Abstract

This article discusses three schools and considers what lessons modern educators might learn from them. The first school described is the Malting House school, where Susan Isaacs taught for several years. The Malting House school, which existed from 1924 to 1929 in Cambridge, England, teaches the lesson of looking, with attention, at everything that children do. The second school discussed is a present-day primary classroom in Hertfordshire, England, where the teaching methods of Annabelle Dixon are described. This classroom demonstrates the relationship between an educator's core values and her pedagogical practices. The third school discussed is Louisa May Alcott's fictional school, Plumfield. The lesson learned from this school is the importance of the imagination, which teaches us to aspire to a more just and harmonious society.

## Introduction

In this paper, I examine three very different schools and classrooms, and I consider what lessons we might learn from them, in terms of enriching our professional thinking. First, I describe a school that is no longer functioning, but for which we have abundant documentation. The lesson from this recent piece of educational history concerns, I suggest, the prime responsibility of educators to learn from the children they teach. The second school represents fact, the present day; I attempt to show how this classroom exemplifies the relationship between understanding and purpose, a lesson in educational values and their steadfast application. The third school is fictional; it is a school where we can, if we choose, learn about the power of the imagination, the power by which we can see into the lives of

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children and reflect on what might constitute the good life for them, in the Aristotelian sense of the life that is worthy of being lived.

### School One

The first school of the three is the Malting House school, in Cambridge, England, founded by the wealthy eccentric Englishman Geoffrey Pyke, whose only son, David, was born in 1921. For this child, his father intended a childhood and an education free of trauma, based on self-discovery and scientific enquiry. To this end, he instigated an experiment in education, not knowing where it would lead. As a first step along the way, in the spring of 1924, he placed this advertisement in a number of journals, including the *New Statesman* and *Nature*:

WANTED—an Educated Young Woman with honours degree—preferably first class—or the equivalent, to conduct education of a small group of children aged 2-1/2–7, as a piece of scientific work and research.

Previous educational experience is not considered a bar, but the advertisers hope to get in touch with a university graduate—or someone of equivalent intellectual standing—who has hitherto considered themselves too good for teaching and who has probably already engaged in another occupation.

A LIBERAL SALARY—liberal as compared with research work or teaching—will be paid to a suitable applicant who will live out, have fixed hours and opportunities for a pleasant independent existence. An assistant will be provided if the work increases.

They wish to obtain the services of someone with certain personal qualifications for the work and a scientific attitude of mind towards it. Hence a training in any of the natural sciences is a distinct advantage.

Preference will be given to those who do not hold any form of religious belief but this is not by itself considered to be a substitute for other qualifications. (Gardner, 1969, p. 54)

As we all know, the advertisement was answered by Susan Isaacs, who went on to open the Malting House school in a spacious house beside the river Cam, in the center of Cambridge, in the autumn of 1924. Isaacs remained there until the end of 1927, when she returned to London. In the first term, there was a group of 10 boys, ranging in age from 2 years 8 months to 4 years 10 months. In 1926–1927, the age range was 3 years to 10 years 5 months, and in the last term covered by Isaacs' own records, there were 20 children in the group, ranging in age from 2 years 7 months to 8 years 6 months. Isaacs' only biographer, Dorothy Gardner (an ex-student and devoted friend of Isaacs), is less than forthcoming about the reasons for Isaacs' departure from the school in 1927, but it was almost certainly due to Pyke's becoming more eccentric, more interfering, and a good deal less wealthy. A terrible crash in the futures of the copper market in the autumn was clearly one of the precipitating factors in Isaacs' move; Pyke's fortunes did not immediately improve, and the school finally closed at the end of 1929 (Gardner, 1969; van der Eyken & Turner, 1969).

Back in London with her second husband, Nathan Isaacs, who had himself briefly worked at the Malting House school, there was plenty of work for Susan Isaacs to do. In the first 2 years of the school's existence, she had amassed a vast quantity of anecdotal records of the children's activities, noted down by Isaacs and her assistants. One of her assistants, Evelyn Lawrence, later became director of the National Froebel Foundation (Note 1) and, after Susan's death in 1948, Nathan's second wife. These notes are the basis for the two substantial volumes in which Isaacs documented the work of the Malting House school: *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*, first published in 1930, and *Social Development of Young Children*, which appeared in 1933. Impressively bulky and detailed as these works are, their lasting importance and interest derive in part from the conditions under which the

material was collected. Isaacs' own shorthand description (Isaacs, 1930, p. ix) is that the conditions were "relatively free," but this phrase does nothing to convey the extraordinary qualities of this extraordinary school. We need to look more closely.

The conditions of relative freedom took the form of, first, "an all-round lessening of the degree of inhibition of children's impulses" compared to other schools or family groups (Isaacs, 1930, p. 12). Some practical considerations, particularly for the children's safety, did set a number of limits on their behavior. But by today's standards, there were very few limits, and by today's sensitivities, the limits were set in the most unlikely places. For example, in the garden at the Malting House school were several garden sheds, one of which had a most enticing and accessible sloping roof. The rule was not, no climbing, but a much more daring and child-friendly one: only one child on the roof at a time (implicitly an invitation to climb!). By contrast, there was virtually no constraint on the children's verbal expression, their intellectual impulses, their expressions of infantile sexuality, their anal and urethral interests, their feelings (including anger and aggression), their views on everything that happened around them, and their questions.

The outcome of this relative freedom of expression was, as Isaacs claims and as generations of excited readers have discovered for themselves, a "greater dramatic vividness of their social and imaginative and intellectual life as a whole" (Isaacs, 1930, p. 12). Apart from anything else, in comparison with the primary classrooms where I have taught in the past and regularly observe today, there was no time wasted in the business of forming into lines, waiting in lines, completing the registers, (Note 2) collecting lunch money, searching for PE equipment—all the events that add up to *evaporated time* in Campbell's vivid phrase (Campbell & Neill, 1994, p. 23). All the available time was available for the children, not for the teachers' routines; it was filled with the children's dramatic, vivid lives. Writing in 1927, Evelyn Lawrence described the difference between Malting House children and children at other schools, where they are forced "to wear a mask of seemliness and respectability" (Gardner, 1969, p. 65). Whereas, of the Malting House school, she wrote: "Here the children's crudities, the disorder of their emotions, their savagery even, are allowed to show. Fights and squabbles often occur" (in Gardner, 1969, p. 65). After such a description of children *without* masks, it is quite a surprise to find a photograph, in van der Eyken's essay on the school, of a cluster of perfectly normal looking children, sitting on the grass—although the caption tries to strike an alarmist note: "Some children have taken their shoes off, others have kept them on. There were few rules" (van der Eyken & Turner, 1969).

The second aspect of the "relatively free" conditions that is worth noting is the combination of the physical environment and the way in which the adult educators responded to the children's impulses and initiatives. These two elements of the curriculum, taken together, led the children to be more active, more curious, more creative, more exploratory, and more inventive than they could have been in any ordinary school. The children passed their days moving freely between a large hall, plentifully equipped, with a gallery and a piano, four small rooms (one used largely as a science laboratory), and a large garden with animals, including, at different times, mice, rabbits, guinea-pigs, two cats and a dog, hen and chickens, snakes and salamanders, silkworms, a wormery, and a fresh water aquarium. There were two lawns, abundant fruit trees, real bricks for building, space for bonfires, a seesaw with hooks so that weights could be fitted underneath, and much more. Indoors, the provision was no less stimulating: small movable pulleys, which could be screwed in where desired; a full-sized lathe and woodworking equipment; Bunsen burners, with all the necessary trimmings of tripods, gauzes, flasks, and test tubes; modeling materials, textiles, paint, and writing materials; cupboards full of Montessori equipment; microscopes; and dissecting instruments. Given all this, Isaacs' claim that "there was more for us to see, and we could see it more plainly" (Isaacs, 1930, p. 12) seems a calculated understatement, almost designed to provoke.

Provoking some of the children's activities undoubtedly were, as we shall shortly see. But first, I want to emphasize the uses to which Isaacs puts her rich observational material. She did not collect an inert mass of data, nor publish her observations for them to sit tamely on the page. The data have been set to work to construct a coherent account of the development of children's intellectual and emotional powers. In the 1930 book, Isaacs describes their powers of discovery, reason, and thought; in the 1933 sequel, she gives a comprehensive account of their social relations: their hostility and aggression, as well as their friendliness and cooperation, their love and hate, their guilt and shame, and their capacity for compassion and reparation. Every accumulating inch of descriptive text plays its part as evidence for the conceptual framework of learning and development that Isaacs constructs and consolidates. In these two volumes, what she and her colleagues saw, so vividly and plainly, is transformed into a geography of learning, as she charts the children's explorations of both their inner and outer worlds.

For this enterprise, Isaacs was supremely well qualified—not just because of the material in her possession, and the time she devoted to it, but also because of her own intellectual and emotional biography. It is worth pausing here for a brief summary of her life story. Pulled out of school at the age of 15 by her father because she had confessed to becoming agnostic, she stayed at home with her stepmother (her father refusing to speak to her for 2 years) until she was 22. In 1907, she enrolled to train as a teacher of young children (5- to 7-year-olds) at the University of Manchester, where the course was led by Grace Owen. She soon transferred to a degree program and graduated in 1912 with a First class degree in philosophy. She was promptly awarded a graduate scholarship at the psychology department at the University of Cambridge and emerged with a master's degree in 1913. Isaacs then embarked on a series of lectureships—in infant school education at Darlington Training College, in logic at the University of Manchester, and in psychology at the University of London. More important, as I shall argue later, is that around 1920 she started her first psychoanalysis, and in 1922, she started her second. In the same year, she started medical training in order to practice as a medical psychoanalyst, but she did not proceed to work on the wards. She began her own practice in psychoanalysis in 1923, a year before she took up the post at the Malting House school.

So Isaacs was in no way a conventional infant school teacher. She was also a philosopher, a psychologist, and a practicing psychoanalyst. All of these perspectives contribute to the richness of what she saw and the strength and depth of her understanding. In a revealing paper given in 1938 to the Education Section of the British Psychological Society, with the title "Recent Advances in the Psychology of Young Children," Isaacs argues that psychoanalytic research is especially important in the study of children, because it is concerned above all with "*the meaning of the child's experiences to himself*" (Isaacs, 1948, p. 84, Isaacs' italics).

It is interesting that in the period 1927–1930, Isaacs originally intended to write one book about children, not two, because she thought the same data threw light on both intellectual and emotional development. It was with regret that she abandoned this plan and separated intellectual growth and social development. In *The Children We Teach* (1932), a much shorter book, she reintegrates these two domains, emphasizing the interconnectedness of affect and cognition: "The thirst for understanding springs from the child's deepest emotional needs, a veritable passion" (Isaacs, 1932, p. 113). This powerful insight is constantly emphasized by Gardner (1969) who writes: "no-one who studied with her [as Gardner had done] would be tempted to forget that children cannot be really emotionally satisfied unless they can also learn, nor really learn unless their emotional needs are met" (p. 149).

In my work as an in-service educator with early childhood practitioners, on short courses and at diploma and master's levels, I frequently use examples and extracts from Isaacs' work, attempting to demonstrate how much there is to learn from the Malting House school. But the extracts I select do not always have a very warm reception. I have long abandoned attempts to convince contemporary early years



practitioners that Bunsen burners should have a place in their provisions, but I am still surprised by the frequently noisy and hostile responses evoked by passages such as the following:

18.6.25. The children let the rabbit out to run about the garden for the first time, to their great delight. They followed him about, stroked him, and talked about his fur, his shape, and his ways.

13.7.25. Some of the children called out that the rabbit was ill and dying. They found it in the summer house, hardly able to move. They were very sorry, and talked much about it. They shut it up in the hutch and gave it warm milk. Throughout the morning they kept looking at it; they thought it was getting better, and said it was "not dying today."

14.7.25. The rabbit had died in the night. Dan found it and said, "It's dead—its tummy does not move up and down now." Paul said, "My daddy says that if we put it into water, it will get alive again." Mrs. I. said, "Shall we do so and see?" They put it into a bath of water. Some of them said, "It is alive." Duncan said, "If it floats, it's dead, and if it sinks, it's alive." It floated on the surface. One of them said, "It's alive because it's moving." This was a circular movement, due to the currents in the water. Mrs. I. therefore put in a small stick which also moved round and round, and they agreed that the stick was not alive. They then suggested that they should bury the rabbit, and all helped to dig a hole and bury it.

15.7.25. Frank and Duncan talked of digging the rabbit up—but Frank said, "It's not there—it's gone up to the sky." They began to dig, but tired of it, and ran off to something else. Later they came back, and dug again. Duncan, however, said, "Don't bother—it's gone up in the sky," and gave up digging. Mrs. I. therefore said, "Shall we see if it's there?" and also dug. They found the rabbit, and were very interested to see it still there. Duncan said, "Shall we cut its head off?" They re-buried it. (Isaacs, 1930, pp. 182-183)

But the educators' resistance to the idea of children digging up a dead rabbit is as nothing compared to their comments on passages that describe Isaacs and the children doing what she called "looking inside" dead animals:

14.6.26. During the week-end, the cat had knocked over a cage of mice, and the "daddy mouse" was dead. The children looked at it, and spoke of its teeth, tail and fur. Mrs. I. then said, "Should we look inside it?" They agreed eagerly, and she dissected it in a bath of formalin. Dan, Jessica, Christopher and Priscilla watched with eager and sustained interest. They shuddered when the knife cut into the skin, but comforted themselves with the thought that it was dead. They saw the guts, kidneys, liver, heart, ribs, backbone, airpipe, foodpipe and stomach, brain, inside of eye, inside of mouth, and tongue. Christopher asked to see "the thinking part." They asked Mrs. I. to cut open the gut to show the faeces. Later, the children spent some time watching the silkworms and caterpillars, and feeding the rabbit. (Isaacs, 1930, p. 185)

Little do the educators know, as the discussion rages around the group, that there are, concealed in my teaching file, other extracts that would fan the flames yet higher:

26.1.26. Mrs. I. found that Dan and Priscilla had cut a worm into pieces with a saw. They spoke of the blood and "inside."

18.2.26. The children went into the garden. Priscilla wanted to pull a worm into halves, and said she would marry the boy who did. They all said they wanted to marry her. Dan eventually did pull the worm in halves. Frank then pulled the rest of it apart; they were very excited about this. (It should be noted how few instances of actual cruelty are recorded against Priscilla.) (Isaacs, 1930, p. 205)

I do not often venture to use this last extract: I cannot commend it as useful teaching material. But I remain interested in why today's practitioners respond so violently to material that dramatically illustrates important aspects of children's lives, in particular, the ways in which "the desire to master and hurt," in Isaacs' words (Isaacs, 1930, p. 164), co-exists with "the impulse to cherish," and the problem this contradiction poses to parents and educators who want "to make a positive educational use" of both these impulses. To a certain extent, Isaacs herself anticipated some of these difficulties. In the section of *Intellectual Growth in Young Children* where she discusses children's biological interests, she writes a superb exposé of the inconsistencies of contemporary adult thinking about appropriate

behavior to animals. She demonstrates the contradictions in adult injunctions to be kind to all animals—except wasps, slugs, mosquitoes, and foxes. And although children must be kind to cats, they must not imitate what cats do to mice or baby birds. Isaacs identifies a variety of confusions, which are still with us, in the cultural constructs with which we do our everyday biological thinking—confusions well worth reflecting on by educators interested in the growth of children's key ideas in the biological domain.

Another difficulty for educators today may reside in the emotional domain. It is possibly—more or less—painful to be expected to tolerate children's expressions of emotions, such as cruelty, rage, and hatred, which, as adults, and particularly perhaps as early childhood educators, we have long learned to stifle and repress. Wearing masks ourselves (of perpetual good humor and an encouraging smile), we may well be alarmed by children *without* masks, speaking and acting from the heart.

But the core of the matter is surely that all educators (and I include myself) prefer to focus on those characteristics of children that match our educational aspirations, our aims and ambitions, our pedagogical purposes. We select for our attention those aspects of children, indeed of childhood, that fit our finest hopes and dreams, whereas Susan Isaacs did no such thing. When she was preparing *Social Development in Young Children*, she was advised to omit much of her material, because it was considered too shocking and likely to offend. But Isaacs took no notice. "I was not prepared to select only such behaviour as pleased me, or as fitted into the general convention as to what little children should feel and talk about" (Isaacs, 1930, p. 19). So, for example, on November 21, 1924, Isaacs notes that Harry, not quite 5, follows her to the lavatory, peering through the frosted glass and shouting with glee: "I can see her! I can see her combinations!" (Isaacs, 1933, p. 140). Isaacs' comment on this and many other such incidents (some, doubtless, likely to cause offence in an academic paper) is compellingly blunt: "I was just as ready to record and to study the less attractive aspects of their behaviour as the more pleasing, whatever my aims and preferences as their educator might be" (Isaacs, 1933, p. 19).

Isaacs is equally blunt in explaining her position: "The first reason is that I myself happen to be interested in *everything* that little children do and feel" (Isaacs, 1933, p. 113). This uncompromising position is one of the reasons why Isaacs' thought remains so invigorating today. By being interested in everything, she developed a prodigious capacity to follow the growth of children's thinking and feeling, even when they went in unexpected and undesirable directions. Isaacs was simply not interested in the extent to which children's thought mirrored her own or the extent to which they made their faces fit the conventions of an arbitrary adult society. To see children as Isaacs saw them is to see them whole, vividly and dramatically, with all their strengths and weaknesses intact. The Malting House school teaches us the lesson of looking, with attention, at everything that children do (and think and feel) as they live and learn in our benevolent provisions for them.

## School Two

The second school to be presented is of the present day—a small primary school in Hertfordshire, in an area of extreme economic and social disadvantage, within sight and sound of the M25, the congested beltway that circles London. The teacher whose work I will describe, Annabelle Dixon, is now a research associate at the School of Education, in the University of Cambridge, England. Until September 1997, however, she was deputy-head and classroom teacher, and I have had the privilege of observing her work and her class of children on many occasions over the last few years. (Note 3)

During the academic year 1996–1997, when the observations I will draw on below took place, there were between 17 and 20 children in the mixed-age class (from 4 to 7 years old). Many of these children came to school without having had any breakfast, which explains why, when the hatch in the dining hall flew open at 10:30 before the mid-morning break, there was a long queue of children in place to buy slices of freshly buttered toast at a modest price. One of my abiding memories of this classroom is of the children wandering back to the cloakroom, toast in hand, collecting their coats, sometimes losing their toast en route. In trying to bring this classroom vividly before your eyes, I do not intend to trivialize what I have seen there, but to demonstrate that this classroom is a most exceptionally educative environment—a place, above all, of genuine intellectual search.

For example, pinned on the notice board behind a huge, comfortable, embracing sofa is a "New Words" list. Annabelle explains that on this list she and the children record words that the children have not met before. They are encouraged to mark these occasions, to interrupt the discussion or the story to ask for explanations and definitions, and to record the word in question on the list. On one visit, the list read thus:

amaryllis	toffee-nose
ferocious	energy
anxious	cauldron
transparent	nocturnal
gasp	series

These are not dead words, such as are found on many classroom walls, unread, unremarked, unremarkable. These words enter the children’s thinking and expand their understanding; even the youngest 4-year-olds are caught up in this process. For example, during story time, a child notices that on the back of the book his teacher is holding up there is a list of books by the same author. Delighted, he calls out: "Miss, that’s a series *there*, on the back of the book." Another day, at tidying up time, a child calls from the book corner: "Miss, we’re tidying up the series!" One child confided to Annabelle: "Everything’s a series really." When invited to say more, he obliged with a variety of examples—his family (his brothers and sisters, in order of age), the days of the week, the times on the clock, and so on.

On another visit, I recorded another list including the words:

oval	bouquet
environment	identical
S.O.S	impatient
cuboid	saint
nervous	calf

On this same visit, my notebook records that Annabelle told me that, in the previous term, the fathers of 4 of the 17 children in the class were serving prison sentences. As I digested this information and copied down the New Words list, I thought of the alarming finding of Tizard and Hughes (1984), in their small-scale nursery school study, that the teachers asked lower-level questions of the children in the



working-class sample than of those in the middle-class sample. The comparison is a telling one: there is little that is low level in *this* classroom. Incidentally, I had already noticed that Annabelle asks fewer questions than many teachers I have observed, although she did tell me about this exchange:

AD: Where does a river start?

Child: "r."

(Her comment to me: "34 years in the classroom and I'm still asking silly questions.")

The children ask good questions though, and follow them through in a search for understanding. For example, Adrian (5 years 2 months) said to Annabelle: "I think I've found something out (demonstrating with the binoculars he has been examining). There's two bits here (points) and two bits here (the eyepieces) and when you look, you only see one picture!"

Many of the children's questions are recorded in a class book, for future reflection and discussion. (For example: "Do cats have to chase mice in real life?" "Why do letters have names as well as sounds?") There are also individual investigations, fired by individual thinkers. I observed Ricky (age 5) collecting his maths book and settling down to write on a page already crammed with numbers:

AD: Ricky, do you want to carry on?

R: Yeah.

AD: Really? Are you sure?

R: Yeah.

AD: (to me) This is the fifth day. He's discovering even numbers.

(His book shows he has reached 748.)

Liam (6 years 2 months), who has different concerns, is working on a different project. The old bulgy and commodious sofa has been replaced by a new one, which is undoubtedly smarter and cleaner, but which only seats three children at a time. Liam is worried that some children are enjoying more than their fair share of this new privilege, so he has collected a printed copy of the class list ("one of my most useful resources," claims Annabelle) and a clipboard and is keeping a tally of who sits on the sofa and how often. His writing is stiff with inaccuracies, if seen in terms of letter formation, capital letters, or punctuation marks, but it is nonetheless effective in his personal project—social justice.

On the notice board next to the New Words list is a quotation from Wittgenstein (himself for a while an elementary teacher, in the 1920s, in small village schools up in the mountains south of Vienna): "The limits of my language are the limits of my mind." (Note 4) Annabelle's response to this apothegm is to structure much of her teaching around what she calls "tool-words." The first of these words to become important in her pedagogy was "problem," when she realized, some years ago, that without this word in their working vocabularies, children did not appreciate what was happening to them when they met a problem. She reasoned that if they could understand what kind of an experience a problem was, they would more readily deploy their intellectual and emotional energies in finding ways of solving it. And so it proved. Once her pupils had grasped that a problem (a disagreement with a friend, a technical difficulty in a construction project with the blocks, a puzzling observation of the natural world) could be understood as a challenge to their inventiveness and ingenuity, indeed could be relished, explored, and finally resolved, they were much less likely to walk away from problems, to abandon their projects, or to refer their disputes to adult authority.

Building on this discovery, and the children's appetite for more, Annabelle has developed a list of essential "tool-words" for children's thinking, which includes the cluster of concepts *identical*, *similar*, and *different*; the verbs *compare*, *remember*, *comment*, and *question*; and the nouns *imagination*, *team*, and *mystery*. During one of my visits, Annabelle showed me the work the class had been doing on the school's behavior policy document, which had recently been written in consultation with the older pupils, ages 8 to 11. Annabelle's response to the policy was to ensure that the key words used in the document could be understood by her much younger children: she accomplished this goal by building up working definitions of words, such as respect, drawn from the children's lives. A large sheet of paper recorded this work in progress:

"Keeping secrets from people isn't respectful."

"Swearing at people isn't respectful."

Annabelle overheard a child swearing quietly to himself one day, while searching his tray for a missing treasure. When he saw her, he stopped, with a guilty flush, but not because his teacher had heard him. "That's not respecting myself, is it?" he explained. My own notebook records Stephen (age 6) complaining to the whole class, gathered for a discussion, "People have been talking about my cold sore. That wasn't respectful."

In this classroom, respect is a key theme: respect for children's powers, for their emotional and intellectual energy. In Annabelle's teaching, this respect translates into a willingness to follow what she calls "the grain of their thinking," rather than trying to "teach against the grain." It is transparently clear, from minute to minute in this classroom, that there is a direct relationship between the lived curriculum, the first-hand experiences of these young learners, and the values of the educator who provides and organizes their experiences. It is the children's strengths that are valued, not their weaknesses. Their powers to do, to think, to feel, to understand, to represent, and to express are given space and time to grow. The curriculum that these children and their teacher construct together offers them both nourishing food and challenging exercise; the quality of the children's learning reflects their teacher's faith in their limitless potential to learn.

In presenting this brief description of one particular classroom in one particular school, I want to exemplify a much more general theme and suggest that what can be learned from such a classroom (and I have no doubt there are others like it, perhaps not identical, but similar) is the close and necessary relationship between values and classroom practice, between values and schooling, between values and the whole enterprise of education.

In my work as external evaluator for a number of local education authorities over the last 10 years, I have, inevitably, started from my own perspective as a value-infused educator, but I do not believe this perspective prevents me from trying to understand the values as well as the practices of other educators, those whom I am observing and whose effectiveness I have been charged with evaluating. In one such project, the Hampshire program of one-term entry to primary school (Drummond, 1995), I drew particular attention to one aspect of the findings from 200 hours of observation in 50 selected schools:

The evidence suggests that in those classrooms where expectations of the children were high, the quality of learning was also high. When the activities made demands on children's powers to think, to solve problems, to imagine, to create, to build, to express themselves and to organise their work, the children responded actively and with enthusiasm. When the programme required the children to sit and listen for long periods of time, to follow instructions, to produce prescribed outcomes, the children met these expectations, certainly. But opportunities were lost for richer and more rewarding learning. (Drummond, 1995, p. 53)

This comparison, not unexpected but nonetheless important, has something to say about the need for high—but realistic—demands on children's intellectual and social powers. But I am suggesting here that the comparison has more than one lesson to teach. It also underlines the seriousness of our collective professional responsibility to make wise choices in the priorities that our classroom practices enact and embody. Which capacities of children do educators, and the educators of educators, really value? Do we, as a professional community, value young children most highly as independent, creative freethinkers or as people who keep silent when they have plenty to say, who walk when they would choose to run, and who sit up straight, with alacrity, whenever we ask them to? There are choices to be made in this domain, choices that are made every day in classrooms, corridors, assembly halls, and lecture theaters. They are choices worth examining, which is my justification for having taken this space to describe, however selectively, one classroom, one set of values, one set of practices.

### School Three

As my article title suggests, the third school is a fictional one, although the selection of just one school in this category has been extremely difficult. It was with great regret that I abandoned the project of exposing the schools and schoolrooms where Ivy Compton-Burnett's fictional (and autobiographical) children are educated. (Note 5) Another possibility, grudgingly relinquished, was an exploration of the work of the contemporary writer Anne Fine (1993, 1994, 1996), a critical communicator on the sociological structures of schooling thoroughly in the W. A. L. Blyth tradition (see, for example, *How to Write Really Badly*, *Flour Babies*, and *The Angel of Nitshill Road*). There is a fascinating school in B. F. Skinner's (1962) utopian fantasy *Walden Two*, where the students are never graded and are not taught traditional subjects at all, only the generic skills of learning and thinking. Hardest of all to set aside was the school described by the great Polish educator Janusz Korczak (1992) in *When I Am Little Again*, a moving interpretation of a few days of classroom life as seen through the eyes of a child, the author himself, grown "little again."

The fictional school that I finally selected is Plumfield, which draws its inspiration from a real-life school, as of course all fictional schools do to some extent (except in William Morris's (1901) utopian novel, *News from Nowhere*, where there are no schools). Plumfield is the creation of Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888). It first appears in the second half of the double volume of *Little Women* and *Good Wives* (1868), at the very end of *Good Wives*; it is the central theme of *Little Men* (1871) and is still a successful school in the background of *Jo's Boys* (1886). The real-life school from which some of Plumfield's practices are drawn is the Temple School, a short-lived experiment in progressive education, founded and directed by Alcott's father Bronson Alcott, writer, transcendentalist, and friend of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and the amazing Peabody sisters.

The Temple School was not Bronson's first school, but it was undoubtedly the most visited and the most notorious. Bronson Alcott began teaching in 1825 in Cheshire, Connecticut, in a school regarded as alarmingly progressive, which lasted only 2 years. The school found some admirers in Boston, however, where, in 1834, after further failures in Philadelphia, Bronson opened the Temple School with 18 pupils, boys and girls between 5 and 10 years old. The walls were decorated with busts of Plato, Jesus, Socrates, Milton, and Shakespeare. Bronson modeled himself on both Jesus and Socrates, and his pedagogical approach was a combination of parable, sermon, and Socratic dialogue. His daily, hour-long conversations with the pupils were faithfully transcribed, as they took place, by Elizabeth Peabody and later by her sister Sophia (wife of Hawthorne). The first year's work was published in 1835 as the *Record of a School* (Peabody, 1835). One brief extract will give a flavor of these unique proceedings:

*Alcott:* Which was first in time, an acorn or an oak?

*Child:* Sometimes one is first, and sometimes the other. In the woods, oaks grow up wild; and you can plant acorns and have oaks.

*Another child:* I think God made oaks first, and all the other oaks there have ever been, came from the acorns of those first oaks.

*Alcott:* Does light prove darkness or darkness light?

*Several:* Each proves the other.

*Alcott:* Can nothing prove something?

*All:* No.

*Child:* I think darkness is something.

*Alcott:* Is darkness anything to your senses?

*Child:* No; it only seems so.

*Alcott:* What does it seem to be?

*Child:* It is the shadow of the light. (Bedell, 1980, p. 111)

The school prospered, and visitors flocked to listen and admire. However, when Bronson widened the scope of these conversations to include such topics as marriage, love, birth, and circumcision, the tide turned. A second volume of transcribed dialogues, *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (A. B. Alcott, 1837), proved his downfall. This volume, according to the *Boston Courier*, was "a more indecent and obscene book (we can say nothing of its absurdity) than any other we ever saw exposed for sale on a bookseller's counter" (Saxton, 1977, p. 92). By the spring of 1837, the experiment was over, precipitated by the admission of a black child, Susan Robinson. This act of principle, by a convinced and passionate abolitionist, caused the parents of his few remaining students to withdraw their children.

Louisa May Alcott was born in 1832 and celebrated her third birthday party at the Temple School, wearing a crown of flowers and distributing cakes to the students. She and her three sisters, later to be known by generations of young readers as the four March girls (their mother's maiden name was May) were all educated at home by Bronson and so were intimately acquainted with Bronson's unconventional educational methods, which we find, 35 years on, transformed into the fictional Plumfield, most fully described in *Little Men*. Plumfield is an integrated, coeducational, inclusive boarding school, managed by the wild tomboy Jo March in her new role as the compassionate and motherly Mrs. Bhaer, wife of the German immigrant Professor Bhaer: "a happy, homelike place," Jo calls the school, at the end of *Good Wives*.

*Little Men* is unusual in Alcott's oeuvre in having next to nothing by way of a plot: the center of interest is the children and their daily lives. Plumfield's children, like the children at the Malting House school, are recorded in their totality, children as they really are—unique individuals who are at times, and by turns, mischievous, timid, sickly, spoiled, lazy, grouchy, courageous, teasing, compassionate, and—all of them—thoroughly loveable.

The following extract will introduce the school to those whose own childhoods were not infected with Alcott's imaginative powers. It is taken from the first chapter and reveals how the Plumfield experience bursts upon a new boy, Nat, who arrives late on a Saturday evening. Safely tucked up in bed, after a



luxurious bath and a hot sweet drink, Nat is startled by

the sudden appearance of pillows flying in all directions, hurled by white goblins who came rioting out of their beds. The battle raged in several rooms, all down the upper hall, and even surged at intervals into the nursery, when some hard-pressed warrior took refuge there. No one seemed to mind this explosion in the least; no one forbade it, or even looked surprised. Nurse went on hanging up towels, and Mrs. Bhaer looked out clean clothes, as calmly as if the most perfect order reigned. Nay, she even chased one daring boy out of the room, and fired after him the pillow he had slyly thrown at her.

"Won't they hurt 'em?" asked Nat, who lay laughing with all his might.

"Oh, dear, no! We always allow one pillow-fight Saturday night. The cases are changed to-morrow; and it gets up a glow after the boys' baths; so I rather like it myself," said Mrs. Bhaer, busy again among her dozen pairs of socks.

"What a very nice school this is!" observed Nat, in a burst of admiration.

"It's an odd one," laughed Mrs. Bhaer; "but you see we don't believe in making children miserable by too many rules, and too much study. I forbade night-gown parties at first; but, bless you, it was of no use. I could no more keep those boys in their beds than so many jacks in the box. So I made an agreement with them: I was to allow a fifteen-minute pillow fight, every Saturday night; and they promised to go properly to bed, every other night. I tried it, and it worked well. If they don't keep their work, no frolic; if they do, I just turn the glasses round, put the lamps in safe places, and let them rampage as much as they like."

"It's a beautiful plan," said Nat, feeling that he should like to join in the fray, but not venturing to propose it the first night. So he lay enjoying the spectacle, which certainly was a lively one . . . . A few slight accidents occurred, but nobody minded, and gave and took sounding thwacks with perfect good humour, while pillows flew like big snowflakes, till Mrs. Bhaer looked at her watch, and called out:

"Time is up, boys. Into bed, every man Jack, or pay the forfeit!"

But not all the children's frolics are so innocent and lighthearted. Under the influence of Dan, one of the most challenging of Jo's little men, the boys learn to swear, to smoke, to drink, and to play cards. The downward spiral seems inexorable, until Tommy Bangs sets his bed on fire and they are all rescued and set on a straighter path once more. The boys (the girl pupils arrive later) spend extraordinarily little time in the schoolroom; far more important in their lives are the garden, the orchard, their dens, the trees they climb, their band, their story-telling, their menagerie, their museum, and the stream they regularly fall into. Through her descriptions of life at Plumfield, Alcott offers a perspective on curriculum that is at least as progressive as her father's. Essentially, it is a curriculum of relationships, constructed within a harmonious vision of what society might be—loving and inclusive, where children's growth and well-being, in the most comprehensive senses of those words, are central values.

Professor Bhaer teaches the children German, Greek, Latin, and Algebra, but Jo teaches what *she* knows: "lessons more important than any taught in school"—and yet it *is* a school in which she teaches these things. (Note 6) She teaches her little men to care for one another; she teaches them "honesty, courage, industry, faith in their fellow-creatures and in themselves." She imagines the world transformed by such an education:

"Dear me, if men and women would only trust, understand and help one another as my children do, what a capital place the world would be" and Mrs. Jo's eyes grew absent, as if she were looking at a new and charming state of society.

*Little Men* can be read as an account of the good life, for adults and children, being lived in a good society, where the children largely educate one another. They do so through their turbulent and passionate relationships, as well as through their play, their shared imaginative explorations of the universe, and their intrepid physical explorations of the tops of trees and the tangled dark center of the



forest where Rob and Nat get so terrifyingly lost. Their induction into the good life, their education in the moral domain, is continuously carried out in every corner of Plumfield's sheds and gardens and orchards, as well as in the Socratic schoolroom, with its slates and textbooks. "Dear me," explains Jo, "half the science of teaching is knowing how much children do for one another and when to mix them." The dissolution of the boundaries between the home and the school makes Plumfield a society in miniature, a place that is humane enough for children to flourish in and to learn the real meaning of the humanities they study in their books.

Although some aspects of Plumfield are rooted in Alcott's own first-hand experiences, it is, essentially, a triumphant work of the imagination. In this imaginary school, Alcott shows us, not simply children's learning, but children's lives as they might be, if learning were coterminous with living, and if body and mind, thinking and acting, reason and passion, the one and the many could be educated together. Alcott sets these living, learning children into a different kind of school, more home than school, more society than home. Furthermore, into this "new and charming state of society," Alcott introduces a different kind of teacher. These teachers, according to Susan Laird, "work at the sidelines, as attentively participating observers, not at the centre as autonomous dictators of their students' learning experiences" (Laird, 1991, p. 283). And all this nearly 50 years before Dewey picked up his pen (*Democracy and Education* was published in 1916).

### Conclusion

In this concluding section, I attempt to distill the lessons that I believe can be learned from these three schools; I do so as a way of emphasizing the need for the whole professional community of early childhood educators to take whatever help we can get to support us in the task of doing our own thinking, reflecting, and analyzing, rather than simply responding to the directions of others.

Earlier, I quoted Susan Isaacs: "I am interested in everything that little children do. . . ." This interest was strengthened by Isaacs' unshakeable conviction of the "desperate need of children to be *understood*" (Isaacs, 1933, p. 13) and of their equally burning desire to understand: "The thirst for understanding . . . springs from the child's deepest emotional needs . . . [it is] a veritable passion" (Isaacs, 1932, p. 113). Isaacs is outspokenly clear that some kinds of schooling, some parts of the education process as it was currently being practiced, could stifle this passion and crush this strong, spontaneous, constant impulse towards learning. The comparisons she makes between what is and what might be cannot have been comfortable reading for contemporary educators intent on maintaining the status quo. Only in the infant school, says Isaacs, "before children have been taught to separate learning from playing and knowledge from life, will you see the strength and spontaneity of the wish to know and understand" (Isaacs, 1932, p. 113). This act of *seeing*, she implies, is central to the work of the teacher.

I find it remarkable that in Isaacs' published work (her lectures to teachers have not, I think, been preserved), there is little to read about teachers and teaching. There are some exhilarating passages in *The Children We Teach* and a stirring letter, written in 1936, full of stinging criticism of what she saw in schools, which has a certain relevance for readers today:

We teach reading and writing far too early, substituting sterile attempts to compose with the pen for living communication by word of mouth. Today the school deliberately deadens the child's (real) interest and idolatrisés the formal tools of learning. (Gardner, 1969, p. 166)

But there is little by way of positive exhortation: her position is that teachers must start with children

and develop their thinking from there. In an examiner's report, for example, she writes:

I do wish we could give up teaching these dreary old theories of play. It seems to me pathetic that students spend so much time on discussing Schiller, Groos, etc instead of . . . going direct to children at play and seeing for themselves what play does for children's development. (Gardner, 1969, p. 155)

This is where I believe Isaacs has most to teach us today—and tomorrow. The lesson to be learned from the Malting House school, and every line that Isaacs wrote about it, is that the starting point for effective educational practices is to attend, respectfully and systematically, to "everything that children do."

In describing Annabelle Dixon's classroom, I tried to demonstrate the relationship between an educator's core values and her pedagogical practices. In a sense, whenever teachers teach, and whatever else they teach, they always teach themselves. The lessons to be learned from making comparisons between the practices of different educators, from the present or the past, is that "why" questions, in answer to which we can establish the value base of our own work, are more useful than "what" and "how" questions. Asking "why" of others can lead to asking "why" questions of oneself. However, asking why questions, particularly of oneself, can take a considerable toll on the educator's sense of security and well-being. To ask oneself why is always to risk the Mother Hubbard effect: the cupboard of reason, rationale, justification, explanation may turn out to be bare. In effective classrooms, such as Annabelle's, the cupboard is well stocked. Practices can be justified. Arguments can be convincingly made about the importance of certain kinds of learning, about the power of children's thinking, about the activities and experiences that are most likely to strengthen those powers. Educators who can and do speak out as articulate advocates for children's learning are a most valuable resource for all other educators who are committed to the enterprise of coupling up their most dearly held educational beliefs with the routines and rituals of schooling, with their moment-by-moment interactions in the classroom. Understanding children and children's learning is not enough; effective educators understand themselves. Anyone who can help in supporting this process—and through courageous acts of comparison, every educator can help—is a most welcome member of a profession that has never ceased striving for quality, but has had, in recent years, limited opportunities to do this kind of thinking, this kind of work.

Finally, I used a fictional classroom, conceived in the imagination of an unjustly neglected 19th-century writer, to illustrate the abiding importance of this power in the lives of teachers and other educators. When, in other contexts, I try to put together arguments to establish the centrality of the imagination in the process we call early childhood education, I am often struck by the confidence and clarity with which other writers from outside this particular professional community make their case. Mary Warnock, for example, has this to say:

I have come very strongly to believe that it is the cultivation of imagination which should be the chief aim of education, and in which our present systems of education most conspicuously fail, where they do fail . . . in education we have a duty to educate the imagination above all else . . . (Warnock, 1976, p. 9)

. . . imagination is that (power) by which, as far as we can, we see into the life of things. (Warnock, 1976, p. 202)

The power to see into the life of things—and into the lives of both teachers and children as Alcott did—is an essential component in the professional capacities of educators of young children. These educators need to be strong in the exercise of their professional imaginations, not indulging in wishful thinking or planning in ever more precise detail their desirable curriculum outcomes, but seeing "into the life of things," seeing into the full-blooded lives of the children for whose learning they have taken on responsibility. To strengthen this power, I am arguing, educators need to commit imaginative acts of their own—in company with Alcott, or Anne Fine, or Janusz Korczak. These tutors of the imagination

can help us to see more plainly, and more deeply, if we do not take fright at the intimacy necessitated by such seeing or at the learning that might result from it. Isaacs wrote, in a late paper, in the context of children's lives, that learning depends on interest, and that interest is derived from desire, curiosity, and fear (Isaacs, 1952, p. 108). All these emotions are familiar to teachers too. They are all part of their most binding responsibilities: to learn more about children, teaching, and learning; to increase their understanding in the interests of children; to put that understanding to work for children. I have presented, in this paper, three of the lessons that will play a part in this learning: the lesson of looking, of seeing more plainly; the lesson of value, of learning to marry purpose with practice; and the lesson of the imagination, which teaches us to aspire (as Alcott did) to a more just and harmonious society, in our schools, in our shared futures.

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### Notes

1. The National Froebel Foundation was founded in 1938 (by the unification of the Froebel Society and the National Froebel Union) and was responsible for the training and examination of teachers in Froebelian methods, awarding the Froebel Teacher's Certificate to its own students and to external students from, for example, the Froebel Educational Institute at Roehampton, Surrey.
2. This ritual is known as "taking attendance" in American classrooms.
3. I am enormously grateful to Annabelle Dixon for the many rewarding discussions I have had with her over the years and for the ways in which she has enriched my thinking and my understanding.
4. The exact reference, as I found when preparing this paper, is just as pithy and just as relevant to children's thinking and learning: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein, 1922).
5. Ivy Compton-Burnett (1884–1969), English novelist, wrote 20 idiosyncratic and powerful novels about domestic life in upper-class Edwardian families, some of which disturbingly resembled her own. Her recurring themes are power, selfishness, domination, cruelty, and criminality. The families she describes are peopled by a number of remarkably precocious children, whose teachers, tutors, and governesses are no match for them. The schoolroom scenes in these novels have much to say about the complexity and drama of pedagogical relationships.
6. In a useful commentary, Susan Laird, a leading feminist in curriculum studies, makes the thought-provoking observation that Mrs. Jo, as the children call her, is a school teacher but not a classroom teacher (Laird, 1991).

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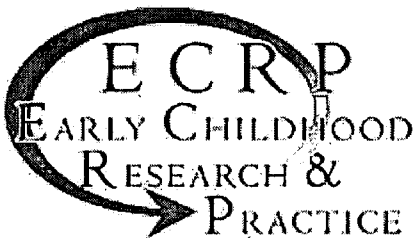
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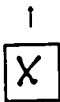
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